

## Bookreview: The politics of the governed: reflections on popular politics in most of the world. By Partha Chatterjee. New York: Columbia University Press 2004. ISBN 0-231-13062-7

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# Book reviews

**The politics of the governed: reflections on popular politics in most of the world.**  
By Partha Chatterjee. New York: Columbia University Press. 2004. 200 pp. \$33.00 Cloth.  
ISBN 0 231 13062 7.

*The Politics of the Governed* is a rich collection of essays drawn from lectures in the USA and India in which Partha Chatterjee addresses subjects that include nationalism, the transformation of contemporary Kolkata and America's hegemonic role before and after 9/11. The essays are as theoretically engaging as they are varied, providing intelligent and accessible commentaries on the work of Anderson (1998) and Negri and Hardt (2000), as well as a broader engagement with concepts of governmentality as these play out in the contemporary global South.

The theme around which many of these different strands coalesce is the relationship between political participation and forms of governance, in particular, the role the post-colonial state plays in shaping its subjects. Here, Chatterjee draws a distinction between two ways in which the modern state views people: as citizens, or rights-bearing members of a national political fraternity and as populations, or subjects who are constantly divided and re-arranged by government as targets of policy. He argues that the post-colonial state deals with its people primarily as governed populations, and that this mode of operation has been reinforced in part through its expanded interventions conducted in the name of 'development'.

Lacking full citizenship, the vast majority of India's population – and by extension their counterparts across the global South – are left to make claims on the state from the murky field of political brokerage that Chatterjee calls *political society*. It is here that the needs of this excluded populace are voiced and are sometimes met, but always as conditional claims rather than formal rights. Political society emerges as both an important moment in state–society relationships, and as a space of possibility where new forms of democratic representation can be created by working through the contradictions of post-colonial governance.

Throughout the book, these central arguments are fleshed out through a diverse collection of illustrations that includes Ambedkar's drafting of the Indian Constitution, the death of a leader of a Hindu sect, and contemporary attempts to regulate *madrasah* schooling. Again and again, seemingly esoteric or mundane events are cleverly used to open up debates of global significance. There may be questions as to whether these primarily Indian (and particularly Bengali) examples can ever speak for 'popular politics in most of the world', but this is one of India's foremost public intellectuals writing at the top of his form. As such, *Politics of the Governed* deserves a wide audience in geography.

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